

# Should Instructors Provide Students with Complete Notes?

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Course management software programs make it especially easy for instructors to provide students with a set of complete lecture notes. It seems that more instructors are doing this, as witnessed in the regularity with which students ask that the instructor's notes be posted. But is giving students a complete set of notes a good idea?

Previous findings (like those of Kenneth Kiewra, highlighted some years back in this newsletter) recommend against this practice. Kiewra's research demonstrated both a process and a product benefit of note taking. The process benefit accrues when students make selections about what to note and when they use at least some of their own words to record that material. When students record lecture content using their words, it becomes easier for them to connect new material with things they already know. This process benefit is lost when students are provided with complete notes. Even so, students prefer teacher notes because they think that having the content in the instructor's words will better prepare them for exam questions.

The product benefit of note taking obviously comes as a result of having a product, in this case a set of notes, that can be reviewed and studied subsequently. It is generally thought that instructor-provided notes enhance this benefit because students don't have to worry about losing notes (they are always available online) and because the material in instructor-provided notes is sure to be accurate.

However, a recent study confirms Kiewra's earlier findings—but with an interesting elaboration. In this study, psychology students received either a complete or a partial set of instructor notes. The partial notes included major headings and titles made up of definitions and concepts, but students needed to write in the additional information. In both cases, students were instructed to download the notes and bring them to class. About three-fourths of the students complied with this directive.

The researchers looked at the impact of the complete versus the partial notes on exam scores, final grades, and attendance. They found that those students who received partial notes performed better on the third and fourth exams and earned significantly higher course grades. They did not find "differential effects of note type on class attendance." (p. 10)

There was one other "noteworthy" effect. On the final exam, the students who received partial notes performed better on conceptual questions, those questions that involved "application of a theoretical concept to an example that required additional mastery of the material beyond the definition." (p. 8) Researchers speculate that the students with partial notes had encoded material throughout the semester, and when confronted with the large amount of material they needed to know for the final, they understood more and so had to rely less on memorization.

Based on their findings, these researchers recommend providing students with partial notes. Giving students some notes conveys the instructor's sensitivity to their concerns about getting the material they need from a lecture. If those notes provide the outline or structure of the material, students can concentrate on understanding the information rather than on trying to figure out how to prioritize and organize the material. Partial notes also clarify what students need to be writing and still retain the process benefit of note taking by forcing students to encode some of the content. The researchers summarize their results this way: "Partial notes ... may provide a nice balance in terms of providing students with some notes, which they report as helpful, and still requiring encoding and higher-level processing of information, which will ultimately improve learning and performance." (p. 11)

Reference: Cornelius, T.L., and Owen-DeSchryver, J. (2008). Differential effects of full and partial notes on learning outcomes and attendance. *Teaching of Psychology*, 35 (1), 6-12.

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